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BOOK REVIEW

The nature of sexual desire, by James Giles, University Press of America, Inc. 2008, 218 pp.

In writing this book, the author has attempted, with success, to deconstruct the complexities of the nature of human sexual desire. The method and style of writing is from an inquiring perspective, the philosophical roots of which are based on the premise that reality is composed of objects and events that are within human consciousness and Giles attempts to search for the underlying meanings within sexual desire. Overall, the intricacies of what constitutes sexual desire are evident within the chapters, which cover areas such as the sexual process, sexual desire, gender and being in love. There is clear and thoughtful discussion and review of sexual desire and the continuums present in each of these areas from which it is formed. Of particular interest is the focus on deconstructing ideas from differing theoretical, philosophical, psychological, cultural and social constructionist perspectives, which creates a lively, if at times slightly complicated, narrative throughout the book. These differences in professional opinion, however, leave the reader with useful insights and points to consider whilst reading.

Initially, the reader is led through an analysis of why contemplating and discussing sexual desire is, in itself, a complex issue. Giles presents the components of sexual desire, whilst raising the issue of what it is that we desire is a central, yet existential problem to define. This chapter gives us a multi-faceted understanding, with a number of conflicting theories presented.

The following two chapters, focus on the sexual process and the object of sexual desire. Giles discusses the physiological, behavioural and experiential events involved. This chapter may be of particular interest to those working within a sexual health context and certainly provokes thought into the wider components of sex itself and human desires. In deconstructing, in detail, the object of sexual desire, Giles skilfully presents theories and their challenges. There is also an interesting commentary on the ideas of vulnerability and sex, which again I feel is an interesting area to explore clinically in working within a sexual health setting.

The penultimate chapter is centred around the structure of being in love, again approached from a detailed analytical perspective. The theories of love, from two-component models to passion and commitment, are described and critiqued. In describing the non-exclusivity of love, Giles raises interesting cultural constructions related to the ideas around singular and multiple partnerships. Overall, this chapter raises the reader's awareness of the consideration of being in love in detail, when it is generally a concept that is discussed and written about as if it is a 'known' idea.

The final chapter of this book turns our attention to the social construction of sexual desire - proposing that it only exists in the culture which has constructed it. In concluding the chapter, the author posits that perhaps it is an existential human need and one that is the "core human distinction".

There are two main issues I found within this book that are worthy of note. Firstly, due to the very nature of its detailed, deconstructive and discursive approach, at times it can get extremely specific and this might leave the reader finding it hard to keep the thread of the narrative. Secondly, although the book does not purport to be a therapeutic aid, as a clinician, I was left feeling that its usefulness in a clinical setting may be limited and it would have been valuable to have additional discussions on working within sexual settings and applying the ideas discussed. If you are looking for a detailed analysis, from a multi-theoretical and philosophical perspective, on human sexual desire, this text stands alone for its innovative and comprehensive approach.

Dr Nick King, September 2009